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ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings on relationships between fifth graders' responses to school-specific moral issues and to Kohlbergian moral dilemmas; between their stage of moral reasoning and their moral conduct as rated by teachers; and between teachers' ratings of the children's moral behaviors in several specific areas and teachers' overall rankings of the children's moral conduct. A total of 41 fifth grade children (mean age, 10 years 9 months) were given five of Kohlberg's moral dilemma stories and five school dilemma stories which included issues such as stealing, borrowing, cheating, bullying and telling tales about other children's behavior. Teachers were asked to rate each child's behavior, on each of the issues contained in the children's interviews, as above average, average, or below average in relation to the class. Teachers were also asked to give an overall rating of each child's moral conduct and the reasons for the overall rank. Teachers' overall rankings of students were related to their ratings of two types of behaviors; they gave lower overall ratings to children whom they had rated as above average in either cheating or telling tales. Further, significant correlations were found between children's responses on the school-specific moral issues and the Kohlbergian moral issues tasks. Children who resolved the dilemmas with stage 2 responses were reported by their teachers as cheating more often than children who resolved the dilemmas with stage 3 reasoning; however, no significant correlations were found between children's stages of moral reasoning and the teachers' overall rankings of children's moral conduct. (Author/SS)

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MORAL RESPONSES OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN AND TEACHERS' RATINGS OF MORAL CONDUCT

Joan Thrower Timm

Teachers' priorities for students' moral conduct have long been a concern of educators. Analyses of teachers' concepts in relation to students' views, however, have been sparse. This paper reports findings on the relationship between elementary school children's responses to school-specific moral issues and teachers' ratings of their moral conduct. This paper further reports teachers' ratings of conduct in relation to the children's stages of moral reasoning. Finally, this study reports findings on teachers' priorities for children's conduct in relation to specific moral issues.

Population

All of the children in this study attended fifth grade. Their mean age was 10 years and 9 months. There were 15 boys and 26 girls. Race, socio-economic background and religious affiliation were controlled. All of the children were Caucasian and came from middle class families of the Roman Catholic faith. The I.Q. range was 90 to 143, with a mean I.Q. of 120. I. Q. differences were accounted for by co-variance in the statistical analyses. 21 children attended public school and 20 attended

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Parochial school in a suburban area of Boston. Teaching methods in both schools were similar and can be accurately described as traditional. In both schools the teachers placed high value on the children's conduct and effort.

Method

Kohlberg has classified six stages of moral development, based on both longitudinal and cross-cultural research. These stages are well documented elsewhere and will not be analyzed here. Our basic measuring instruments were five of Kohlberg's moral judgment stories and five school dilemmas, constructed by myself and edited by Kohlberg, which included issues such as stealing, borrowing, cheating, bullying and telling tales about other children's behavior. These dilemmas presented a situation followed by a series of questions. Each child was asked to give reasons for each answer.

All 41 children were interviewed individually. All interviews were tape recorded, transcribed and scored according to Kohlberg's manual for determining stages of moral reasoning. For greater accuracy, the issue scoring method was used, rather than the global scoring method.

The Students' Interview

Following are two examples of the school-specific moral dilemmas and some of the accompanying questions.

I. Jim's class was going on a field trip. Jim had lost his spending money on the way to school. Just as the class was

getting ready to leave, there was a fire drill. Jim was the last person to leave the room. He ran over to another student's desk and took some of that child's money. Then he ran outside for the fire drill.

What do you think?

1. Should he have done that? Why?
2. How would he feel about taking money if he did not get caught? Why?
3. How would he feel about taking the money if he did get caught? Why?
4. Bill saw Jim take the money. Should he tell the teacher? Why?
5. Bill is Jim's best friend. Should he tell on his friend? Why?
6. Tom also saw Jim take the money. Tom does not like Jim. What should Tom do? Why?
7. If the teacher finds out that Jim took the money, what should she do? Why?
8. Should Jim be allowed to go on the field trip? Why?

II. Bill had to take a test in geography and he did not know the answers because he had not read the book. During the test, the teacher received a phone call and had to leave the room. Bill saw that the boy who sat next to him knew the answers.

What do you think?

1. Should Bill copy the answers to get a good grade? Why?

2. Suppose Bill did copy the answers and nobody found out that he had copied. How would he feel about copying? Why?
3. How would you feel if someone copied you? Why?
4. How would you feel if your best friend copied you? Why?
5. What should the teacher do if she found out that Bill had copied the test? Why?

It should be noted here that when girls were interviewed, the names in the dilemmas were changed to girls' names.

One dilemma involved teachers' actions. We closed the interview with the open-ended question "Is there anything in school that you think is unfair? What is it? Why do you think it is unfair?"

When the interviews began, we were somewhat concerned that children might give answers they thought we wanted. Egoistic stage 2 responses, however, appeared early in the process. For example, in answer to the question, "Suppose Bill did copy the answers and nobody found out, how would he feel about copying?", many children answered "He'd feel great - particularly if he got an A"! A typical stage 3 response, on the other hand, was, "Well, I would feel bad because good students don't cheat."

The Teachers' Ratings

Teachers were asked to rate each child's behavior, on each of the issues contained in the children's interviews, as above average, average, or below average in relation to the class as a

whole. In order to maximize how well the teachers knew the students, teachers were asked to rate students' conduct in June, at the end of the school year. These were blind ratings, as none of the teachers saw the children's responses to any of the moral dilemmas.

The teachers' rating scale contained 20 questions. Some examples are:

1. Has this child ever cheated on a test?
2. Does this child let friends copy his or her work?
3. Does this child borrow without permission?
4. Does this child tell tales on other children?
5. Does this child bully or tease other children?
6. Is this child's sense of justice influenced by whether or not the wronged party is a friend?
7. Has this child, to your knowledge, ever stolen anything in school?
8. Are there any extenuating economic circumstances that might explain this?
9. Has the child ever complained that anything in school is unfair? What was it?

On each question, a rank possibility on a 3 or 4 point scale ranged from a high moral conduct score, through an intermediate range to a low score. For example, for the question "Has this child ever cheated on a test?", the rating possibilities were 1) never, to my knowledge; 2) once or twice this year;

3) once or twice a month; 4) at least once a week; and 5) Don't Know or Unsure.

A final question asked the teacher for an overall rating of each child as above average, average, or below average in moral conduct and the reasons for this overall rank.

Statistical Analyses

Inter-rater reliability was calculated as the correlation coefficient between two judges. Percent agreement between judges was 94%. Analysis of variance, with I.Q. co-varied was computed across all groups. Pearson product moment correlations were computed between the children's responses on the standard Kohlberg dilemmas and the school situation dilemmas. Correlations were computed between the children's stage of moral responses and the teachers' ratings of moral behavior. Finally, correlations were computed between different types of behavior and teachers' ratings.

Results

1. Across Groups

Analysis of variance, with I.Q. co-varied, revealed no significant differences between the parochial and public school students, or between the boys and the girls. All of the children showed the mixture of predominantly stage 2 and stage 3 moral reasoning reported by Kohlberg and his associates for normal subjects, ten years of age.

2. The Kohlberg Dilemmas Compared With The School Dilemmas

Significant correlations were found between the children's moral stage responses to the traditional Kohlberg dilemmas and to the school dilemmas. Correlations across issues appearing in both the standard Kohlberg dilemmas and the school dilemmas ranged from .53 to .79, all yielding a probability level of $<.0001$. Thus, children were consistent in their use of moral stage reasoning.

3. Stage of Moral Reasoning And Teachers' Ratings of Behavior

When the children's stage of moral reasoning was compared with their teachers' ratings of behavior, significant correlations were found between the stage of moral responses and two types of conduct; cheating and telling tales. Children who used more stage 2 responses were reported by their teachers as cheating more often than those children who resolved the dilemmas with stage 3 reasoning. The correlation coefficient was .41, with a probability level of $<.0001$.

These findings follow from the logic of the stages used in reasoning. For example, the instrumental hedonism of stage 2 would predict cheating when it is to the child's benefit. The good boy/girl orientation of stage 3 would predict tattling if a child believed it would help develop the character of another child. On interview, a typical stage 3 response was "Well, I would tell, if I thought it would help him learn."

4. Stage of Moral Reasoning and Teachers' Overall Ratings

No significant correlations occurred between the children's stages of moral reasoning and the teachers' general ratings of moral conduct. Thus, the level or stage of a child's moral reasoning had no apparent effect on the teacher's evaluations of that child's behavior taken as a whole.

5. Types of Behavior and Teachers' Ratings

There were significant correlations between certain types of behavior and the teachers' ratings of moral conduct. Cheating, particularly, influenced the teachers' ratings. This correlation was .50, significant at the $<.0001$ level of probability. In fact, even suspicions and no actual proof of cheating was enough for a teacher to rate a child lower in moral conduct. The correlation between suspicions of cheating and lower ratings was .48, again significant at the $<.0001$ level of probability.

Another behavior which influenced teachers' ratings was telling tales. Those children who tattled on others were again rated lower. This correlation between tattling and teachers' ratings was .40, with an $<.04$ level of significance.

Teachers thus gave lower overall ratings to children who either cheated or told tales. Apparently these actions have more effect on teachers' evaluations of students' conduct than all other types of moral behavior in school.

Actions like coming to the aid of a friend, returning borrowed objects, borrowing without permission or even bullying

were not significantly correlated with teachers' overall ratings of conduct. When you stop to think about this result, a child telling a tale on a bully was rated lower than the bully!

Discussion

The teachers' ratings indicate that teachers are either less concerned with or less aware of issues which are specifically valued by the children. Are teachers not perceiving the more subtle aspects of children's moral concepts such as respect for each other's property or peer loyalty including giving aid to friends under attack? Furthermore, infringement of rules violates children's concepts of general classroom fairness, but when they report such infringements, they are the ones considered "improper" by their teachers. Issues of teachers' donduct are also important to children. In answer to the final question, "Is there anything in school that you think is unfair?", children most often reported inconsistency of actions on the part of teachers and the fact that teachers would not always give the children a chance to explain their actions. In this study, what a child did mattered more to the teacher than the child's reason for doing it. On interview, teachers sometimes said "I'm not interested in the reasons. I just want to know what happened."

Conclusion

If one of the aims of education is to promote moral growth, then more open discussions between teachers and their students

about the children's reasons for their actions and issues of fairness as perceived by the children are imperative. Such discussions would change the climate in our schools and allow them to provide a developmentally appropriate and more supportive moral environment.